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## **The German Minority in Romania: a Historical Overview**

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# The German Minority in Romania: a Historical Overview\*

by Daniel Ursprung, Zürich

For many centuries German-speaking people lived as minorities in widely dispersed linguistic enclaves across East Central and Eastern Europe. As a consequence of the Second World War, the presence of Germans was restricted to small remaining groups or ended in many places. This can be seen in a broader context as a result of the homogenization efforts of modern nation states. However, the devastating National-Socialist policies, which were strongly approved by a considerable share of the German minorities in Eastern Europe, were the main cause of this. The consequence was the end of German-speaking communities in many places. In this regard, Romania is an exception in Eastern Europe because the large share of the German minority neither fled, nor were they evacuated, expelled or resettled. Even during socialist times the Germans remained as a minority in their ancestral environment and sustained an active German-speaking cultural life and education system, albeit under strict political restrictions which also applied to the Romanian majority. The economic decline and the increasing political repressions in Ceaușescu's Romania in the 1980s prompted an increasing number of Germans to emigrate to the Federal Republic of Germany. This was a process that began in the 1960s as a policy aimed at reuniting families. When the restrictions on leaving the country were eliminated after Ceaușescu's demise in late 1989, the majority of Germans still living in Romania departed for Germany.

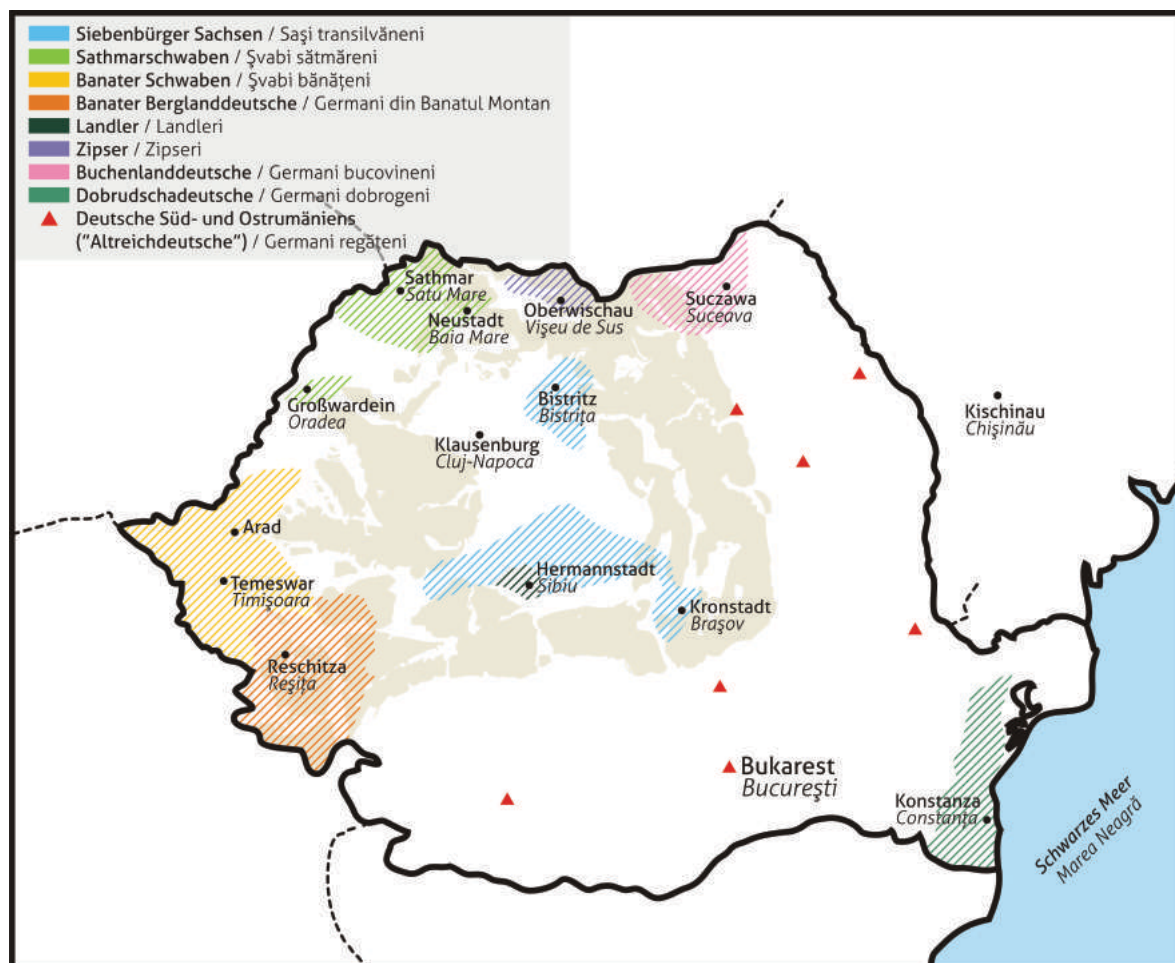
\* This article is a revised and expanded version of an article which initially appeared in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on 7 January, 2015, page 7, see also <http://www.nzz.ch/international/europa/von-privilegierten-siedlern-zur-geschuetzten-minderheit-1.18455941>.

## FIGURES

According to the census, 36,042 people who identified as Germans were still living in Romania in 2011. This corresponded with approximately 0.18% of the total population of Romania, making the Germans the fifth largest ethnic group after the Romanians, Hungarians, Roma and Ukrainians. Only 26,557 people (0.13% of the population of Romania) indicated that German is their mother language though.<sup>1</sup>

In 1930, thus during the interwar period less than one century earlier, approx. 745,421 people (4.1% of the total population) still defined themselves as Germans. Germans settled in nearly all regions of the country, the great majority of them in the two historical regions Transylvania and the Banat, where approximately 1/3 of all Germans in Romania lived: 275,369 in the Banat (37% of the Germans in Romania) and 237,416 in Transylvania (32%). There were 31,067 Germans (4 %) living in the bordering area Satu Mare in North Western Romania (which is partially attributed to Transylvania in a broader sense), while around 10% of the Romanian Germans settled in Bessarabia (81,089) and the Bukovina (75,533). However, due to the resettlement to Germany initiated by the National-Socialist authorities the presence of Germans ended in these two areas that belonged to the Soviet Union from 1940 to 1941 and again after 1944 and are part of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova today. The Germans from Dobrudja, Romania's Black-sea coast region, were also

1 Rezultate definitive Recensământul populației și al locuințelor 2011: Tab8. Populația stabilă după etnie – județe, municipii, orașe, comune, <http://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-2/>.



resettled during World War II. A total of 214,630 people moved to Germany between 1940 and 1943. The large settlement areas of the Banat and Transylvania were not affected by this.<sup>2</sup> In 1930, 12,581 Germans were registered in the Dobrudja (1.7% of all Germans in Romania). A total of 32,366 Germans (4.3%) were counted in the so-called Romanian Old Kingdom, the territories of Wallachia and Moldavia which already belonged to Romania in 1918.<sup>3</sup>

2 Werner Conze, Theodor Schieder etc. (eds.): *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa*. Band III: *Das Schicksal der Deutschen in Rumänien*. Bonn 1957, pp. 46E-47E; Dumitru Șandru: *Mișcări de populație în România (1940-1948)*. București 2003, p. 84.

3 The figures from the 1930 census in

#### TERRITORIES

Transylvania and the Banat, in particular, were thus the two demographic centers of the German population of Romania both under socialism and in the contemporary era. Both regions had their own German-speaking

Sorina Paula Bolovan, Ioan Bolovan: *Germanii din România. Perspective istorice și demografice*. Cluj-Napoca 2000, p. 62; for the Germans in Wallachia see Alexandru Ciociltan: *Comunitățile germane la sud de Carpați în Evul Mediu (secolele XIII-XVIII)*. Brăila 2015; Angelika Herta (ed.): *Vom Rand ins Zentrum. Die deutsche Minderheit in Bukarest*. Berlin 2011, for the Germans in Moldavia see Hugo Weczerka: *Das mittelalterliche und frühneuzeitliche Deutschum im Fürstentum Moldau. Von seinen Anfängen bis zu seinem Untergang (13.-18. Jahrhundert)*. München 1960.

community, which significantly differed from one another in terms of their history, dialect, culture, as well as confession and consistently and deliberately distinguished themselves from each other. A common “Romanian-German identity” has only been able to develop at a rudimentary level. Often the contacts with the neighboring communities (such as Romanians, Hungarians, etc.) were no less well-established than between the Transylvanian Saxons and Banat Saxons, as the two communities are called.

#### **HISTORY: WAVES OF IMMIGRATION**

Both groups can be traced back to different waves of immigration. Transylvania and the Banat both belonged to Hungary and the Hapsburg Empire, respectively, between the Middle Ages and 1918 and were under the control of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th and 17th century. The Germans based in these two regions settled here at different times. The Transylvanian Saxons emerged from colonization in the High Middle Ages. Their main identity-forming characteristics were the German language and the Lutheran confession. The Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, who has been in office since late 2014, belongs to this group. They can be compared historically with other German minorities which emerged in the course of the medieval colonization based on German law, for example in the Baltics, Poland (Silesia), Bohemia (Sudeten Germans) and contemporary Slovakia (Carpathian Germans).

A second wave of German emigration took place after the Hapsburgs conquered Hungary in the late 17th century. Southern Hungary had been ravaged by the long wars with the Ottomans, which is why the Hapsburgs deliberately invited colonists in the 18th century, many of them from the German-

speaking regions. This approximately coincided with the settlement of ethnic Germans in (Tsarist Russia) in the 18th and 19th century (the Germans in Bessarabia can be considered “Russian Germans” from a historical perspective).<sup>4</sup>

#### **DESIGNATIONS FOR BANAT SWABIANS AND TRANSYLVANIAN SAXONS**

The new German-speaking minorities that emerged in different parts of Southern Hungary at that time are stereotypically called “Swabians”, even though only some of them came from this southern German region. The “Banater Schwaben” (Banat Swabians) live in the Banat, in the extreme west of Romania around the city of Timișoara. Their most famous representative is the Nobel Prize Laureate for Literature, Herta Müller. Unlike the Transylvanian Saxons, the Swabians are primarily Catholic. The Swabians and Saxons speak different German dialogues and had a reserved attitude towards one another. The Swabians never had legal privileges comparable to the Saxons and cultivated closer contacts with groups speaking other languages – mixed marriages in the multiethnic area with new settlers were much more widespread than Transylvania, which was segregated according to the three Transylvanian estates: the (Hungarian) nobility, the (Hungarian-speaking) Székelys and the Transylvanian Saxons (Romanians were not represented in the political system of medieval and early-modern Transylvania). The strong solidarity among the Saxons and their more historically distinct identity as

4 For the different waves of immigration and the different German groups in Eastern Europe see the series *Reihe Werner Conze, Hartmut Boockmann (ed.): Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas*. 10. Bände. Berlin 1993-1999.

Germans had the effect that almost all of them migrated to Germany after 1989, while somewhat fewer people from the Banat migrated due to widespread mixed marriages with spouses with local roots. According to the census of 2011, the community with the largest share of Germans is Petrești (German: Petrifeld) with a German population of 27 %, of which less than a third declared German as its native language. It is located in Satu Mare area (German: Sathmar) in Northwest Romania. The Satu Mare Swabians (*Sathmarer Schwaben*) have also strongly linguistically assimilated to the Hungarian majority, but still prefer to describe themselves as German, not least for reasons of prestige. Like the Banat Swabians, the Satu Mare Swabians settled in this area in the 18th century. Both groups can be regarded as regional sub-groups of the primarily Catholic “Danube Swabians”, the group of settlers, who settled in Hungary starting in the early 18th century after the Great Turkish Wars.

#### TRANSYLVANIA

The Transylvanian Saxons are the most significant and tradition-rich group of Germans on Romanian territory nowadays. Their beginnings can be traced back to medieval Hungary. Transylvania, which is located in the middle of Romania today, was part of Hungary until 1918. In order to economically develop the region and to secure it militarily, the Hungarian kings recruited colonists. The first Hungarian king – King Saint Steven –, who was crowned in 1000, already warned his son: “A country that only has one language and one set of customs is weak and fragile”. Therefore one must treat settlers from different countries decently.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> György Györffy: Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft der Ungarn um die Jahrtausendwende.

The large-scale settlement of western colonists began in Transylvania around the mid-12th century and lasted until the late 13th century. The beginnings of the German linguistic enclaves in Transylvania therefore coincide chronologically with the gradual advance of the German language into present-day eastern Germany to the east of the Elbe River.<sup>6</sup> The city of Sibiu (German: Hermannstadt) founded by settlers in southern Transylvania was first mentioned in documents in 1191<sup>7</sup>, several decades earlier than Berlin. Attracted by tax exemptions, land grants and legal privileges, the primarily German-speaking settlers were all called “Saxons”, which did not refer to their origin, rather was a conventional designation for privileged settlers from the west. The German-speaking inhabitants of Transylvania therefore still call themselves Saxons up to today.<sup>8</sup> One primary area from which the migrants came must have been the Moselle-Franconian-Luxembourgian region, although settlers also came from other regions. Initially only the surroundings of Hermannstadt (Sibiu) were called “Siebenbürgen” [literally:

Wien, Köln, Graz 1983, p. 259.

<sup>6</sup> Konrad Gündisch: Siebenbürgen und die Siebenbürger Sachsen. München 1998, pp. 33-37; for the settlement based on German law in comparative perspective, see for example the studies by Jan M. Piskorski (ed.): Historiographical approaches to medieval colonization of East Central Europe. A comparative analysis against the background of other European inter-ethnic colonization processes in the Middle Ages. Boulder, New York 2002; Thomas Nägler: Die Ansiedlung der Siebenbürger Sachsen. Bukarest 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Harald Roth: Hermannstadt. Kleine Geschichte einer Stadt in Siebenbürgen. Köln, Weimar, Wien 2006, pp. 4-6; Franz Zimmermann, Carl Werner (ed.): Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte der Deutschen in Siebenbürgen. Erster Band: 1191 bis 1342, Nummer 1 bis 582. Hermannstadt 1892, pp. 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Konrad Gündisch: Siebenbürgen und die Siebenbürger Sachsen. München 1998, p. 30.



seven castles] (*septem castra*), even though the name originally had nothing to do with seven castles: this is a later folk-etymological reinterpretation, when the name had spread to the entire area also known as Transilvania, where seven administrative units of the Saxons, the nobility and the Székely respectively existed temporarily.<sup>9</sup> The Hungarians called the highlands of Transylvania, which are surrounded by tree-covered mountains on all sides, Transilvania (also Ultrasilvania), because when seen from the center of Hungary, the Pannonian lowlands, they lied beyond the wooded Transylvanian western Carpathian mountains (rum. Munții Apuseni). Along these lines, the Hungarians called the western part of their country to the right of the Danube Transdanubia.

The special legal status of the western, primarily German-speaking settlers in Transylvania was defined in 1224 in the so-called “Andreanum”, which later comprised an extended legal jurisdiction with extensive privileges and self-administration capacities.<sup>10</sup> King Matthias Corvinus approved the so-called “Nation University” (*Nationsuniversität*) in 1486, the legal community (*Rechtsgemeinschaft*) of the Saxons in all the free settlements in which they lived. They were spread like a patchwork all across Transylvania with three centers around Sibiu in the south (“Hermannstadt Province” or “Transylvania” in the narrower sense), in the Burzenland (Rom. Țara Bârsei) around Brașov (German: Kronstadt) in the southeast as well as the Nösnerland (Țara

*Năsăudului*) around Bistrița (German: Bistritz) in the North. The autonomy status definitively stipulated by these means essentially remained until 1876. It was the central foundation upon which the Saxons could sustain themselves as a legal community for several centuries, even though they were always a minority inside Transylvania and only in the majority locally. In the regional Diet of Transylvania, which was established in the late 13th century, the Saxons were one of three estates together with the nobility and the Hungarian-speaking Székely, and thus they controlled the political institutions from which the Romanians remained excluded.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the consistently carefully safeguarded legal autonomy, three factors were influential for the collective identity of the Transylvanian Saxons: the military, economic and confessional situation. The Saxons who settled in remote border regions fulfilled military defense functions time and time again – this was the basis of their privileges. Starting in the 15th century, the Ottoman wars and raids constituted a permanent danger. This was evident in the massive defense structures of the larger cities as well as the fortifications in nearly every village, usually in the form of so-called church fortresses (*Kirchenburgen*) (some of them are on the UNESCO World Heritage list). Just like the quote from Luther “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” (*Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott*), these church fortresses have

9 Gerhard H. Hochstrasser: Siebenbürgen – Siweberjen bedeutet Zibinumschließung – Cibinbürgen. In: Zeitschrift für Siebenbürgische Landeskunde 21/1998, No. 2, pp. 192-195.

10 Franz Zimmermann, Carl Werner (eds.): Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte der Deutschen in Siebenbürgen. Erster Band: 1191 bis 1342, Nummer 1 bis 582. Hermannstadt 1892, pp. 32-35.

11 A comprehensive description of the foundations of the Transylvanian socio-political system of estates in Béla Köpeczi, László Makkai (eds.): History of Transylvania. Vol. 1: From the beginnings to 1606. Boulder 2001 (Atlantic studies on society in change 106; East European Monographs 581); for a detailed overview of the legal status of the Transylvanian Saxons see Konrad Gündisch: Siebenbürgen und die Siebenbürger Sachsen. München 1998.

become an identity-forming symbol of the Saxons. These fortified churches surrounded by defense walls served not so much military purposes, rather to protect the people as well as their belongings.<sup>12</sup>

These generally wealthy settlements of Saxons were popular targets for looting, which in turn sheds light on the economic factor. The Saxon centers of long-distance trade and handicrafts Hermannstadt (Sibiu) and Kronstadt (Braşov) were two of the economically most significant cities of Hungary and generated great wealth through trade with the Orient.<sup>13</sup> Here and in other cities, a class of craftsmen, merchants and entrepreneurs developed, which was economically successful until their misappropriation by the Communists after the Second World War. As a result, the Saxons clearly differed from a social perspective from the Romanians, who formed the majority in Transylvania since the 18th century at the latest, but were legally disadvantaged and frequently were serfs. The Saxons, by contrast, were primarily free farm owners and constituted the bourgeoisie, which had a diverse system of clubs and societies (in the 19th century). For centuries, their autonomous status enabled their isolation from Romanian and Hungarian immigrants, including the nobility, in particular in the cities. Social as well as linguistic and ethnic divisions coincided, which was a decisive factor why the Saxons remained as a German-speaking group in a different language environment.

Their confession was ultimately also an

12 Hermann Fabini: *Die Kirchenburgen der Siebenbürger Sachsen*. Sibiu 2009; Robert Stollberg, Thomas Schulz: *Kirchenburgen in Siebenbürgen = Fortified churches in Transylvania*. Köln 2007.

13 For Braşov Paul Binder: *Handel, Wirtschaft und Industrie*. In: Harald Roth (ed.): *Kronstadt. Eine siebenbürgische Stadtgeschichte*. München 1999, pp. 112-121; Carl Göllner: *Siebenbürgische Städte im Mittelalter*. Bucureşti 1971, pp. 71-91.

additional factor. The reformation spread to the Transylvanian Saxons early, because they consistently had close contacts with the German-speaking area. For example, the Humanist Johannes Honterus (1498-1549) from Kronstadt (Braşov) worked for some time in Basel, where he printed the first map of Transylvania in 1532. After returning to his hometown, he became the reformer of the Transylvanian Saxons, who took on the Evangelical confession of faith based on Luther's teachings in 1545.<sup>14</sup> From this point on, they also differed with regard to confession from the other inhabitants of Transylvania, the Orthodox Romanians and the Hungarians, who remained Catholic or converted to other reformed faiths such as Calvinism. The Evangelical-Lutheran faith, the German language and to a great extent their special legal status as well had now practically become intertwined with one another. With their specific economic and social structure as well as their unified defense against external threats, they consolidated as a community based on a strong feeling of togetherness.<sup>15</sup> This

14 Harald Roth: Johannes Honterus. In: Joachim Bahlcke, Stefan Rohdewald, Thomas Wunsch (ed.): *Religiöse Erinnerungsorte in Ostmitteleuropa. Konstitution und Konkurrenz im nationen- und epochenübergreifenden Zugriff*. Berlin 2013, pp. 686-692; a detailed account of the reformation in Martin Armgart (ed.): *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des 16. Jahrhunderts. Vierundzwanzigster Band: Siebenbürgen. Das Fürstentum Siebenbürgen. Das Rechtsgebiet und die Kirche der Siebenbürger Sachsen*. Tübingen 2012, einführender Überblick pp. 109-175.

15 The feeling of togetherness when faced with an external threat is exemplarily demonstrated by the figure of Michael Weiss, a Braşov/Kronstadt-based town magistrate who lost his life on the battlefield fighting against the tyrannical prince of Transylvania Gabriel Báthory. He is an important point of reference in the collective memory of the Transylvanian Saxons, see Maja Philippi: *Michael Weiss. Sein Leben und Wirken in Wort und Bild*. Bucureşti 1982.

was reflected, for example, in neighborhood institutions (local self-administration bodies). In the 19th century the early modern, class-based confessional structures evolved into a modern sentiment of nationhood based on ethnic-linguistic criteria.

Instead of local particularism, an overarching model of identification comprising all of Transylvania emerged. The Transylvanian Saxons aligned themselves increasingly closely with Germany, in particular after the creation of the German Empire in 1871, while at least the highly educated classes in the cities increasingly used standard German (*Hochdeutsch*) instead of the Transylvanian-Saxon dialects.<sup>16</sup>

However, Transylvania was geographically too remote and the Saxon settlement area too fragmented for any serious discussion of a political union with Germany. Transylvania's incorporation into Romania in 1918 was supported by the Saxons for pragmatic reasons.<sup>17</sup> In the 1930s many Transylvanian Saxons were radicalized by National-Socialism and during the Second World War the ruler of Romania Antonescu (1882-1946), a close ally of Hitler, granted the Germans in the country a special status, which largely subordinated them to Nation-Socialist Germany. After the invasion of the Red Army they were expelled in large numbers to forced labor in the Soviet Union, from where the survivors sometimes

only returned after several years.<sup>18</sup>

#### AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR: EMIGRATION

As a consequence of the Second World War, many German-speakers were forced to flee or were evacuated or expelled from the Baltics, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia and their presence was reduced to small remaining groups. In the Soviet Union the Germans under Stalin were subject to repressions and deportations to Central Asia. Since the late Tsarist era, there were several phases of Russification and stigmatization of the Germans, due to which their knowledge of the German language decreased over time. Romania is a special case in Eastern Europe, because the Germans were not expelled from the country, not least because Stalin was likely against this, as suggested by documents.

Amid the commotion of the Second World War, a small share of the Germans from Romania made it to Germany and remained there. After family reunifications began at a modest level, a growing number of Germans emigrated starting in the 1960s to escape from the repressive Ceaușescu regime. When the travel restrictions were abolished after he was overthrown in late 1989, around half of the remaining 200,000 Germans emigrated from Romania. The exodus continued in the following years at a slower pace. A disproportionate number of older people remained in Romania, while the younger generation is increasingly being absorbed by the surrounding majority population (or the Hungarian population at the local level). The approx. 36,000 remaining Germans according to the 2011 census therefore hardly still exist as a coherent community and it is uncertain how long the German identity and language

16 For the relationship between the Transylvanian Saxons and Germany see Sorin Mitu, Anca Gogăltan: Transylvanian Saxons' identity and the idea of German affiliation 18th – 19th century. In: Sorin Mitu (ed.): Building identities in Transylvania. A comparative approach. Cluj-Napoca 2014, pp. 55-70.

17 Harald Roth: Kleine Geschichte Siebenbürgens. Köln, Weimar, Wien 2003, pp. 122-124; Vasile Ciobanu: Contribuții la cunoașterea istoriei sașilor transilvăneni, 1918-1944. Sibiu 2001, pp. 53-68.

18 See also the articles in this edition.



will be preserved in Romania in the long term. The Transylvanian Saxons have always been numerically in the minority, except for certain cities and villages where they constituted the local majority. Ever since the reforms implemented by Joseph II at the end of the 18th century, which affected the estate-based rights that the Saxons owed their privileged legal position to, fears of the end of the Saxon community have circulated, the so-called “*finis saxoniae*”.<sup>19</sup> The step-by-step restriction of their special legal status in the 19th century, the ethno-political upheavals caused by National-Socialism as well as the politics of national homogenization and social levelling under Romanian socialism are reasons why the century-long presence of German speakers in the region slowly seems to be coming to an end.

#### GERMAN CULTURE IN ROMANIA TODAY

The German language and German cultural influences are indeed still very present, not only in architectural monuments such as church fortresses, Central European old towns and “villagescapes” with the typical closed rows of houses. There is still an intact German school system and church community life in the larger centers with a German population. Public schools in various locations offer programs with German as the language of instruction in certain subjects at all levels from pre-school to university graduation. However, only a small share of the school children still comes from local German families. The pupils primarily come from Romanian and Hungarian families, because the German schools enjoy a good reputation and extensive

<sup>19</sup> Paul Philippi: Nation und Nationalgefühl der Siebenbürger Sachsen 1791-1991. In: Hans Rothe (ed.): Die Siebenbürger Sachsen in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Köln, Weimar, Wien 1994, pp. 69-87.



*Stundturm in Sighișoara / Schäßburg.*  
Photo Kathrin Biegger

knowledge of German is regarded as an advantage – in individual cases, Romanian families even communicate privately with their children in German as well.

Thus part of the German-speaking culture is still cultivated by Romanians and Hungarians nowadays. The remaining German minority has a good reputation and is associated with clichés such as diligence and seriousness. This is one of the reasons for the ascent of Klaus Iohannis to President of Romania. As an outsider, he was elected mayor of Hermannstadt (Sibiu) four times with an overwhelming majority since 2000, while the political representation of the German minority has had an absolute majority in the city council

since 2004, even though only somewhat more than one percent of city's population claims to belong to the German minority. The success of the German Forum<sup>20</sup>, which is seen as being a party of integrity in contrast to the established parties, remains restricted to the district of Hermannstadt (Sibiu) and was not replicated to the same extent in other centers of the German population. Nevertheless, Iohannis succeeded in winning over a majority of Romanian voters, not least due to the stereotype of the honest and hard-working German.

*Translated by Michael Dobbins*

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<sup>20</sup> *Demokratisches Forum der Deutschen in Rumänien* (Democratic Forum of the Germans in Romania), the interest representation of the Germans in Romania, website <http://www.fdgr.ro/de/>; see also the article by Benjamin Józsa in this edition.